

A Canadian Perspective

This exhibition takes the year 1903 as its starting point. When Cuba opened its first commercial office in Canada, both countries were still in the process of achieving full sovereignty. In 1903, relations between the two countries were almost entirely commercial. However they were beginning to diversify from the traditional trade of Atlantic cod for sugar and rum, as Canadian investors and settlers arrived in Cuba to explore the opportunities for rebuilding the island's infrastructure after many years of war.

By 1945, the two countries were ready to establish more formal diplomatic relations. Both Cuba and Canada had fought with the Allies in the Second World War, and both participated in the founding of the United Nations. Canada emerged from the war with a greatly enhanced role in the world, and was keen to establish diplomatic missions in many Latin American countries. Cuba was the first country in the Caribbean selected by Canada for a diplomatic mission, and Prime Minister Mackenzie King chose a noted writer and historian, Emile Vaillancourt, as Canada's first Minister to Cuba. In one of his initial dispatches from Havana back to Ottawa, Mr. Vaillancourt recounted his first meeting with Cuba's Minister of State, Dr. Gustavo Cuervo Rubio, as follows:

"We then talked of some of the historical associations which have drawn our two countries together: (1) of the plaque I had erected in the Cathedral on behalf of the City of Montreal to its distinguished son, d'Iberville, (2) of the part a Canadian [William Ryan] played in the Cuban revolutionary war, (3) of the establishment of the Royal Bank of Canada in Cuba in 1898..., (4) of Sir William Van Horne's supervision of the building of the Cuban railway, (5) of the contributions Canadian life insurance companies have made to the economy of the country, (6) of the flores of Cuba prepared by the late Brother Marie-Victorin of Montreal, and (7) of the hopes that the Canadian Government and people entertain for still closer commercial and cultural relations with Cuba after the war."

Emile Vaillancourt (4th from left) at 240th anniversary of death of Admiral d'Iberville, Havana, 1946



Readers will find photographs dealing with each of the above topics in this catalogue.

After 1959, the Canadian government made the strategic decision not to break diplomatic relations with the new revolutionary government of Cuba. The two countries became more politically distant as Cuba moved towards the socialist bloc countries and Canada remained a firm member of NATO. Nonetheless, Canada increased in economic importance to Cuba as a source of North American goods and technology. Expo 67, the World's Fair in Montreal which celebrated Canada's 100 years of independence, also proved to be a significant window to the world for post-revolutionary Cuba.

By the 1970s, the relationship began to mature and diversify. Charter flights started to bring Canadian tourists to